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The contemporary literature on political participation covers a wide array of actions that would not have been included in the handbooks on the topic just a few decades ago. By itself this expansion should not come as a surprise, as citizens indeed are now active in more, and more different ways than previous generations used to be. My grandfather never used a 'Like' button on his Facebook profile to express his political preferences, and my grandmother certainly never would have joined the Femen-protests that are so successful in attracting media coverage. The character of political participation has changed, and as political scientists we have no other option than to follow this social trend. Holding on to traditional definitions is not a useful strategy to help us to understand societies that have changed so rapidly.

These changes have indeed led to an inflation in the number of acts being included in the definition, and an attempt to arrive at a more appropriate definition is certainly useful. While the introduction of the concept of lifestyle politics has had a number of obvious advantages, expanding the definition to cover almost every life-style decision automatically renders the definition meaningless. As the function of politics is to structure the way societies function, every human act can become politically relevant at some time. If a sufficient number of tourists develop a preference for nude beaches, local government officials eventually will have to respond to this social demand, resulting in a political decision. It would be rather absurd, however, to label this kind of leisure activity automatically as a political act itself, with as only motivation that it will, or might have some political consequence eventually. So bringing in "politically relevant behavior" really opens up a Box of Pandora, and all forms of human behaviour will have to be labeled as political. I do not think this is a useful strategy.

Basically, however, I doubt whether the current text solves all the problems if we want to arrive at a more precise definition. Although Van Deth is a strong believer in the merits of an operational definition, basically this is not the best way to bring more clarity in this debate. Operational concerns are indeed important, but they are what they are. Operational decisions cannot do anything else than to operationalize a theoretical concept. Operational criteria do not help us to decide what we should study and how, they merely help us to delineate our concepts. So the

logical order would have been first to develop a meaningful theoretical concept of political participation, and subsequently to try to operationalize this.

Despite all the obvious merits of the text, I would still argue that Van Deth does not pay sufficient attention to developing a theoretical foundation for this conceptual framework. A number of elements are indeed quite 'unproblematic', since they are included already in the classical definition by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995, 38), as they define political participation as an "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies". It is a correct statement that most of these criteria do not lead to strong debates on the topic. One can wonder however, whether acts of political participation necessarily have to be voluntarily, as it is stated. The obvious example would be compulsory voting. In that case the state orders citizens to cast their vote during elections, but by itself that does not mean that this act of voting becomes meaningless or would become less influential than voting without any form of obligation. As Gertrude Stein would have it: a vote is a vote is a vote, and whether the vote is compulsory or voluntarily does not change anything with regard to its impact.

It is also quite dubious to include the intention of the individual participants themselves as part of the definition. There are three main reasons not to take this step. First of all, it is very difficult to determine what exactly is the intention for participation among people who are active. This can be asked, of course, e.g., by means of a survey among participants. But even then it would be very difficult to do this in an unequivocal manner as participants usually have a number of motivations to participate or not. Furthermore, this only shifts the question. Quite some participation acts are performed mostly with an expressive motivation, i.e., that participants enjoy the act itself, without necessarily having an instrumental motivation. This does not mean, however, that this participation becomes meaningless: expressive acts are just as meaningful as purely instrumental acts of participation. Secondly, even when we could measure the intentions of participants in a valid manner, by no means should we assume that participants themselves always know what their motivation is. Participants can have multiple motivations, these can interact, and participants can also convince themselves on a good story about their own motivations. I remember that when I was a student we used to have all kinds of demonstrations against the policy on university education. In retrospect, I am not even sure anymore what my own motivation was at the time. Just the excitement of these demonstrations, and the fact that my girlfriend was clearly impressed were also strong motivations, I would say with hindsight. The

third, and maybe most fundamental argument, however, is that intention simply is not relevant. Maybe I did only participate in these student demonstrations to impress my girlfriend, but the minister of education did not know this, and in the end we indeed prevailed and the student movement was successful in blocking the intended reforms. I would argue therefore that it does not really matter what the motivation is of the participants, even if when we could determine what these intentions are.

An important shortcoming in the current text, therefore, is that it is not fully clear what the goal of the text is. On the one hand, the aim is to develop a coherent definition, and here the text does indeed offer an important contribution to the literature. Despite the fact that it is often claimed that 'politics' is no longer an exciting topic for younger age groups, in practice it can be observed that actors still are very strongly attracted to the label. If one suggests that a specific act does not qualify as political participation, reactions are usually negative. There is nothing wrong with being a vegetarian, and whether this act considered as an act of political participation or not, does not imply a judgment on the merits of this kind of behavior. Nevertheless, people often do feel insulted if their behavior is not seen as 'political participation'. Apparently, vegetarians themselves feel their preferences are taken more seriously if they are labeled as a form of political participation than if they are not, and this explains a kind of pressure to continuously expand the definition of the concept. So a merit of this text is indeed the effort to limit the boundaries of the concept, and if we do not do this, the concept becomes altogether meaningless.

But subsequently, this strong coherence is blurred again by distinguishing different forms of participation, even arriving at the very ambiguous category of non-political activities, that are politically motivated. This is indeed a very blurry category, and it should not be part of a rigorous exercise to define political participation. Self-evidently there will also be a grey zone of acts that more or less fit the definition but do not offer a perfect fit. Even without being an essentialist, it is clear, however that one does not need a specific definition for this grey zone. Almost by definition, a definition covers the 'essence' of a concept, or the concept in its purest form. Later on, in operational discussions, one can still judge whether a specific entity complies with the definition of the concept, and if so to what extent. But it is not a good strategy to make a definition in itself for these 'grey zone' cases.

These, admittedly rather critical remarks, about the current proposal should not lead to the impression that there are no real problems with the standard definitions as they are being used in

most of the literature. Although I personally would still begin with the approach developed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), the main problem is that they could still depart from the criterion that there should be a relation with “government policy”. Indeed, if political decision-making is situated mostly or even exclusively within the political institutions, the definition is rather straightforward. Any act that can or will have an effect on local or national political institutions in that case counts as ‘political participation’, and there is not much debate about that option. The main problem, however, is that political decision-making by itself has become something of a moving target. If activists want to have an effect on, e.g., environmental policy it is clear that they can no longer suffice with targeting their own national government. The process of political decision-making has become much more diffuse, with tendencies toward horizontal governance structures and networks, globalization and multi-level government. All these tendencies occur simultaneously and they also interact (Huyse, 1994; della Porta, 2013). Citizens who want to have an impact on political decision-making have no other option than to broaden their participation repertoire. They will be forced not just to target their national government, but also various international organizations and agencies that have an impact on environmental policy. Given the fact that there is a trend toward self-regulation among commercial companies, it becomes equally important to target these companies, or their business associations in a more direct manner. One could say that life has become more difficult for political activists: the proliferation of political decision-making in practice means that they will have to be active in numerous policy arenas simultaneously.

What does this imply for political participation scholars? To some extent one could compare political science scholars with the Sami people, living in the northern part of Scandinavia. Since they are completely dependent on the reindeer population for their survival, the Sami have no other option than to follow the migrations of the reindeer herds. Political behavior scholars, too, are completely dependent on the migratory behavior of our topic. If political activism migrates to transnational organizations, or to Facebook, or to other arenas, we do not have any other option than to follow them. If our definitions do not follow the structural trends occurring in reality, in the end we will simply be left out, using outdated categories and concepts.

Political decision-making has become diffuse, and can be seen as the result of a complex interplay between actors situated at various geographical levels. As a result, political participation too, has moved. Self-evidently, definitions and concepts have to be as clear and concise as possible. But if the pellucidity of the topic that we want to investigate itself has diminished, we do not have any other option than to follow this trend. Inevitably this means that the study of political

participation, let alone the study of its effects or motivations, will become more complicated than ever before.

References

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